Sketch

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Songbird

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On the train she could always escape, lose herself for a while among the nameless bodies. She could close her eyes and relax into the safety of that private darkness. On the train.

It was the PATH tubes now, four nights a week to Jersey City. The station there was right across from the Hilton, where she'd been singing, Wednesdays through Saturdays, for the last nine weeks. The Rainbow Lounge it was called; Meredith had found her the job. Meredith, with his hang-dog eyes and out-of-breath voice, wheezing, "Sarah you won't believe it kid the find of the year perfect for you I mean PERFECT." Well, it wasn't bad. The crowd was usually okay, mostly conventioneers or business people in for a meeting. And the house band was really pretty good - all older guys who knew they'd never make it big, and just loved to play. It was okay. It was singing.

She couldn't think of a specific time when she'd known she would be a singer. It just seemed like it had always been there. The choir in Thompson's Crossing, and all the other choirs, and the musty school auditoriums. The years of lessons with Miss Eliza Clark, and the Mississippi State Fair, three years in a row through high school. The family reunions and the summer evenings on the back porch, singing "Ten Thousand Miles," or "Wildwood Flower," with her mother sewing and her father reading the baseball scores. All those songs, "I Come to the Garden," and "Love Lifted Me," and the others; syrupy sentimental songs that you could shake your head and laugh about, but that people always asked you to sing because they were part of home, like something you knew deep down. Later there was the radio, and the records from the Holly Springs Library - Mahalia Jackson and Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald spinning out of her parents' clunky old Magnavox. Singing along and dreaming, those wide-eyed teenage dreams of glamour and fame and being a singer. A singer. On the train, rocking through the tunnel under the Hudson, she closed her eyes and repeated the words to herself.

The train, brakes squealing, lurched to a stop at the Jersey City station. Sarah grabbed her bag, loped through the station and crossed to the Hilton. She changed into her Friday stage dress in the ladies room off the lobby. Eye shadow, powder, rouge; she pinned her hair over her ears and combed it out long in the back, off her shoulders. Then she went into the railroad bar, back of the lobby, waiting for show time. The guys from the band were already there - Eddie and Floyd and Rusty, all sipping Rheingolds and talking football.

"They'll never get to Jaworski, I'm tellin' you."

"They're gonna be tough through the middle, they got. . ."

"Okay, all right, four and a half. I'll take four and a half. Hey Sarah, how's it going?"

"Okay guys. Feel all right?"

Pete, the regular drummer, was out with a cold, they said. They'd lined up a replacement from the city, an old duffer named Sonny, with clicking teeth and a high wrinkled forehead. He was some kind of an official in the musician's union.

"Hey, let's have fun tonight," he was saying. "Let's have a ball."

Sarah had a ginger ale and watched the clock. The band went in for the first show at nine; they loosened up and then started in on "St. Louis Blues." Sarah could hear them from the bar, the bass and the drums thumping, Floyd skittering up and down on the piano, Eddie blowing his first solo on the tenor. All of them stretching it out, getting comfortable. They'd run through "St. Louis Blues" twice, do a long lazy version of "Basin Street Blues," and then roll on into "Take the A Train," upbeat and tight. Then she was on.

She was always nervous, just before. Not sick-nervous or blank-out nervous or anything like that -- just a tense nervous, a little quickening inside, sweat on the palms. She knew the show would be good, that people would like it. She could make them like it. But she never knew exactly how it would be out there, how she would feel or how it would all fit together. She couldn't understand it, really. Sometimes it was just straight singing of a nice bunch of songs and it sounded fine and it was nothing hard to do. Sometimes when the band was really tight and playing well, it was like she was coasting along with them and her voice was another instrument that rounded off the sharp edges of the music. Other times it was like her voice was out front of it all, pulling the band along behind her, making them play a little better maybe, making them come up and push her even more. And then there were other times, not so often, but still, sometimes, when it all ran in together in a way that you couldn't understand. It was just there. It could seem like your voice and the rhythm and the band and the songs were all part of one big thing, without borders, all mixed up and yet all together. That was what could happen sometimes, on the stage.

She wondered if the people out there listening could tell the difference. Maybe not. Maybe for them it was just five people up on a stage who were doing a pretty good job of playing some old jazz tunes. She never knew how it would go, and that finding out was the kick. Maybe, she thought, if nobody else could hear the difference, it was a kick that was only hers, a secret you couldn't share.

She could hear them finishing up "Basin Street," sliding through the last notes, slow and long. She walked out of the bar and around to the side door into the lounge. There was a portable microphone that she used, waiting by the door. She always came in singing in the middle of "A Train," and walked through the audience up to the stage. They'd worked it out during her first week there -- the

guys liked it, the audience liked it, and Sarah liked it because she could get started in the middle and by the time she was up on the stage she was halfway through the song and all the jitters were gone.

Now they were into "A Train," playing it straight through once, Floyd doing a twelve-bar solo and then she was into it too, singing. Chairs scraping and turning, heads twisting - she strolled through the labyrinth of tables, taking her time. Her voice was good and she felt fine. Then she was into the lights, up with the band and rolling on through quickly to the end and the applause was all over them.

They started in right away on "That Old Feeling." Sarah weaved across the stage, edge to edge, prancing a little, and her voice was strong and full. She was feeling great. Later on they would slow it down with something quiet, a couple of ballads, but she loved to start it off like this, straight-ahead and fast, all thumping bass and rhythm moving up with the music, "I saw you last night, and got that oooold feeling. . "

They followed up with "April in Paris" and then Floyd did introductions all around, and after that they eased into "Round Midnight." Sonny wasn't too bad on the drums, if you could keep from looking at him. He didn't look like a drummer at all -- stuck his elbows way out to the sides and flicked at the drums like he was tossing a salad. The hard stage lights caromed off his big false teeth, and his high forehead was as wrinkled as a week-old peach. Still he wasn't bad, and the others were playing all right.

They had a good first show and most people stayed around for the second, which got started at eleven. The applause was still strong and a few requests came up too, always a good sign. Sarah was working hard, sweating a little. She was out front tonight, carrying the band. You could never tell. Maybe it was Sonny, maybe the others were a little too careful, playing it too fine. Anyway she didn't mind. She got out front and stayed there, and the music was all hers. The stage lights were on her and the band all coming up from behind and out there was the flat gray haze of cigarette smoke and the clink of glasses and all the pairs of eyes, looking up at her. They shimmered and blinked in the dim light.

The second show ended just after one. Sarah changed right away - jeans, boots, a suede jacket. She packed her dress and shoes in her bag and headed for the station. The train was half-full even at that hour. Passengers sat slumped into the hard seats, dozing or staring away at nothing. Sarah closed her eyes and leaned her head against a window.

At Fourteenth Street the train shivered and lurched to a stop. The doors clamored open, a rush of people in and out, snatches of conversations. "C'mon, we're late," "We ain't gonna find it here," "I tol' ya, Union Square. . . .," "C'mon, shitface." A bag lady sat down across the way, her shopping bags huddled around

her like children waiting to hear a good story. The doors clanked shut. Sarah stayed on, up to Times Square. She usually met Mark at three, wherever he was playing. Tonight they were filling in at a Burger and Brew on West Forty-Seventh.

She had started seeing Mark four years ago, when they were both students. She'd been a sophomore then, two years out of Thompson's Crossing, and he was a senior, a New Yorker, tall and dark, with slender girlish hands and long slick hair black as shoe-polish. Back then he'd played his guitar and sung in obscure, smoky coffeeshops and basement bars and in Washington Square on weekend afternoons. He would wear a leather jacket with the collar turned up, his head cocked at a lonesome angle, and those beautiful lithe fingers would skate over the strings while strangers dropped quarters in the guitar case yawning on the pavement.

Four years ago. Somehow things hadn't worked out as she'd imagined. Mark had never made it as a solo act, so he'd started a rock band two years ago. They weren't going to make it either. She knew it, he knew it, everybody else knew it, no matter what anyone said. They played high school graduations, class reunions, weddings, bars or restaurants off and on. "We're the kings of double-knit rock," Mark would say, but it was never very funny. Meanwhile her own career -- well, she wasn't a star, but she'd passed Mark a long time ago. And she was still headed up. They both knew that too.

Sarah walked into the Burger and Brew and the band was way over in the corner playing "Light My Fire." The piano was weak and tinny, and the drums were much too loud. Mark picked a good guitar solo, but his voice just wasn't there.

Sarah sat at the bar and ordered a chef salad and a Schlitz. The place was half-empty -- a few couples sprawled back in the corners, some others out on the dance floor, clowning around, drunk. After a while it was over, and Mark found her.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Shitty. I mean shitty with a capital S." He took a long pull of her Schlitz and finished it, and then he stood at the bar, hands on his hips, tapping his foot against her stool. "Let's get outta here."

They walked down Forty-Seventh to Broadway and took the IRT to Fourteenth Street, and from the exit they walked up Seventh Avenue and into Fifteenth Street. Sarah's building was an old-law tenement in the middle of the block; they trudged up five flights of stairs to her apartment.

"You want a beer or anything?" she asked. "I could put on some music."

"No, I'm beat. Let's just go to bed."

They undressed in silence, Sarah shivering in the damp darkness. The heat was off until morning, when it came rattling back through the pipes. They slipped

between the sheets, clutching one another, Sarah on top but then Mark rolling her over, kissing her neck and shoulders. He went on and on and she lay under him, waiting. Sometimes it was good and sometimes she faked it, and sometimes she just watched it happen. Mark pushing down on her, moaning in her ear, her fingers digging in his back. This time she watched it happen.

After awhile Mark slept. Sarah peered out through the window, into the vague glow of the sodium lamps. Cars passed below. Shadows played chase across her apartment ceiling. Mark's fingers lay spread out on the pillow beside her. How she used to love those fingers; she'd kiss them, take them in her mouth and suck each one, warm them between her breasts. She wanted to give them strength, to make them fly still higher and, at the same time, to capture some of their strength for herself, to warm herself in their glow. They lay still and flat, on the pillow. She rubbed her fingertips over them, and then her cheek, softly, and then again her hand, back and forth. She stroked them gently, over and over, as she would a child's.

They were awakened just before noon by the telephone. Sarah lurched up in bed, ran into the kitchen to answer. It was Meredith.

"Hey, Sweets! How's my songbird today, huh?"

"Hi, Meredith. What's up?"

"Lots, honey, lots. Your agent's been doing his homework, and now he's got something to show for it."

"Yeah? What?"

"We're very close, I mean VERY CLOSE to a recording contract with Concord Jazz. Just a couple of things to work out still."

"Yeah? What things?"

"Just a couple of little things. . ."

"What things, Meredith? C'mon for Christsakes."

"I just need to drop by your place sometime so we can talk this over, Sweets, how about Sunday? Is that rock and roll dropout still hangin' around all the time? Can you get rid of that creep for awhile?"

"Meredith, I. . ."

"I mean, Sarah, you've got to learn how to tell the bacon from the rind -- a little Southern metaphor for you there, like it? -- and this clown's definitely rind, spell it R-I-N-D."

"Look Meredith, why don't you. . ."

"I'll come by on Sunday, all right?"

"Yeah, okay, all right."

"Oh, and tonight at the Hilton there's gonna be one Very Important Person there to catch your act. V-I-P. Give him a good one, he might just have an offer,

okay?''

'Yeah? Who. . .''

''Just give him a good one, and I'll see ya' on Sunday, all right?''

''Yeah, okay, Meredith.''

Sarah hung up and went back to the bedroom. Mark was already up and half-dressed.

''Who was that?'' he asked.

''Meredith.''

''What's that greasy twerp up to?''

''He wants to drop by tomorrow.''

''He wants to get into your pants again.''

''He says he's worked out a contract with Concord Jazz.''

Mark was putting on his socks and when she said the word ''contract'' he hesitated, just for a second. It wasn't even a full second really, she thought, probably more like a tenth of a second, something you wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't been looking for it. It was just a flicker, and then he went on, trying to make up for that lost tenth-of-a-second, trying to cover it up. ''No shit,'' he said. ''That's all right.'' And then he was looking out the window. It was a sunny breezy day, and two children were playing on the fire escape of the building across the street.

''Hey, how about some coffee and donuts?'' said Sarah.

''No, I've gotta get moving,'' said Mark. ''I've got an appointment at one.''

''Yeah? Who?''

''Just some guy.'' He got up to leave and gave her a quick kiss. ''So I'll see you around three tonight -- all right?'' He walked out and closed the door behind him.

Sarah put on a pair of jeans and a sweater, made a pot of coffee and poured herself a bowl of Total. She took out the box of donuts, half-expecting roaches, but she didn't see any. She slipped out a donut and took a bite.

Meredith. ''I just need to drop by your place sometime, Sweets.'' Meredith with his basset-hound eyes, sitting on the couch by her, edging closer. She had made two serious mistakes last year when Meredith became her agent. The first mistake was that she slept with him, just a single time, one lonely afternoon. The second mistake was that she told Mark about it. One afternoon when nothing else was happening, a half-hour of wrestling on the couch with clumsy Meredith, knees and elbows all in the wrong place. To tell the truth she could hardly remember it at all. But now it had a full life of its own, like a perpetual motion machine. Mark going off in a huff; Meredith a little closer on the couch. A little closer, an arm over her shoulder, saying the same things he'd said that afternoon last year. Saying those things that she could shrug or laugh about except that, when

she looked at him, she knew that he believed them himself. "Sweetheart, you are really a special -- I mean of all my people you are THE SPECIAL ONE, the one who's gonna make it. I mean that, seriously. Seriously. We're going places, huh, Sweets?"

Meredith and Mark.

She sat in the rocking chair in the living room, feet propped on the window sill, and gazed at the building across the street. The building was just like hers, an old-law tenement: six floors, eight apartments per floor, with an average of three persons per apartment; that was one hundred and forty-four people in the building. The population of Thompson's Crossing was ninety-two. All of Thompson's Crossing could fit into that one building, with two floors to spare.

When Sarah left for New York, Aunt Ruby had given her a going-away party. Almost everyone from Thompson's Crossing was there, as well as all of her relatives, from all over Mississippi. Aunt Ruby put up tables in the back yard under the sycamore trees, and everybody set out whatever they'd brought with them: fruit punch, country fried ham and biscuits, Aunt Nell's okra gumbo, cookies and cakes and special pies.

They all sat together in the shade of the sycamores, eating and telling stories. Stories about aunts and uncles and grandparents and kids, stories that'd been told before but that nobody minded hearing again. Later that evening, after they had finished eating, Sarah sang all their requests. The gospels and the hymns and the old southern folk songs - "Love Lifted Me," and "Wildwood Flower," and "I Come to the Garden," and "Ten Thousand Miles." She had sung the same songs for as long as she could remember. The words had long since lost any meaning. Those songs were like something pure, something outside of time, like those recipes and the family stories. She sang them for the others, and all their eyes were on her.

After a while Miss Eliza Clark stood up and said a few words about dreams coming true. Those were the very words she used. "We can be mighty proud tonight, 'cause some of Sarah's dreams are just startin' to come true." And then everyone was wishing her good luck in New York, and kissing her and saying goodbye, and it was over. Sarah stood on the porch and watched them go.

She gazed out her window at the dingy tenement. The kids were still out on the fire escape, running back and forth, laughing. One floor below two old ladies were leaning out their windows, jabbering back and forth. Those ladies were always there, every day, their cushions on the window sills, leaning out on their elbows, yakking and yakking. She wondered what they could talk about for so long. Maybe they were talking about her, she thought. They could see right into her apartment -- maybe they were talking about the girl who always slept until noon.

Sarah got up and put on a Billie Holiday tape. Then she sat on the couch and flipped through a copy of the *Village Voice*. The kids went in from the fire escape - it was clouding up outside. Maybe Mark would phone later, she thought. "I've got an appointment at one." What appointment? Maybe he'd give her a call later. Billie was singing "Strange Fruit." "Strange Fruit" had been banned on the radio back in Mississippi because the governor said that it provoked race riots. Before that, "Gloomy Sunday" had been banned on the radio because they said it caused widows to commit suicide. Sarah finished the *Voice* and looked back through the window. The old ladies had gone inside. Rain would come soon. Maybe Mark would call later, or maybe somebody else would call. She checked to make sure the phone was plugged in, you could never tell. Billie was singing "God Bless the Child." She'd written that one herself, after her mother refused to loan her twenty dollars. The music played on through the afternoon. Rain slanted down outside.

Later on she showered, ate a tuna sandwich and some yogurt, and packed her Saturday dress and shoes for the evening show. She set out for the station in the rain. The train was packed, standing room only, shoppers and families and rowdy kids out for a night. Sarah leaned on the standrail.

She was much too early at the Hilton. In the ladies room she took her time, smoothing her dress over her hips, lining her eyes. "A V-I-P there to catch your act." What V-I-P? Meredith and more of his nonsense. "Give him a good one, might just have an offer." Probably somebody from Concord. Or a club in the city maybe. Just maybe. She turned at the mirror, left, and then right and around. Not bad. Damned good, in fact. Saturday night was the sexy-dress night, a long white job that was split up to her thighs in front and swooped down low in back. What would Miss Eliza Clark say about this one? "Lord child, I just don't know. Lord, Lord." Sarah walked out and into the railroad bar.

The guys were already there, sitting in a row on the barstools.

". . . and Carmichael. You seen that guy? Christ, he must be seven feet tall."

"Four and a half, Rusty. You ain't getting' any more."

"Hey, Sarah, how's it going, kid?"

"Okay, guys. Feeling allright?"

"Great, great."

She sat on a stool and drank a ginger ale, waiting. In a while they were on.

Pete, the regular drummer, was back in again and everybody was warm and playing fine. They started off with the regular numbers and then Sarah sang "I Ain't Got Nothin' But the Blues." Pete was laying it down smooth and neat and Rusty had the bass moaning right up behind her, and then the piano just slipped in softly from the other side, subtle, like a stranger with his arm suddenly around your shoulder.There was a big crowd there and they applauded like crazy, and

after that it just got better and better. Her voice was all there tonight and she was using every bit of it, breathing it out like all her life. It branched out into the room, and everything else was in its shade.

When they were leaving the stage after the first show, Bronson, the stage manager, told Sarah that somebody wanted to see her. He pointed to a hefty man in a light blue suit, sitting alone at a table by the side wall. She walked over and the man leaped up to greet her.

"Sarah, how're you? Doug Kessel here, with the Blue Note on West Fifty-Second. You heard of us?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Have a seat, have a seat."

She sat down and he pulled his chair close to hers. He was a short rock of a guy, with black hair that grew in a tangle of tight scribbles, close to his head. The hairs seemed to sprout up all over him - the tops of his fingers, out of his nostrils. His eyebrows were as thick as a boxwood hedge.

"Terrific show, great voice," he was saying, in a windy high tenor. He drummed his stout fingers on the table and then twirled his bourbon around in the glass. "Really super, super." And then his chair was edging closer and he lay his fingers across her forearm.

"You know, I'm always on the lookout for girls like you," he said, suddenly softer. "Girls with real talent." He took a quick slug of the bourbon and pulled his mouth back in a grimace. "How would you like to come sing for me? No big deal, just come by Tuesday night, sing four or five numbers and we'll see how it goes. If everybody's happy, then maybe we can work out something regular." He rubbed her arm with his forefinger, back and forth, like he was stroking a kitten.

"Why yes, of course; I'd love to."

"Great, terrific." He took another sip of the bourbon. "Just be there at seven. Huh, sweetheart?"

And then she was saying that was fine, just fine, and getting up to leave. She went back to the railroad bar, and sat for awhile with a ginger ale. It happens just like that, she was thinking. A meeting, a couple of minutes at a table, another rung up the ladder. That's how it happens. That's all. A Tuesday night at the Blue Note, maybe weekends at the Blue Note. Fifty-Second Street. Just like that.

The second show was easy, fun. She coasted through "Willow Weep for Me," and some Ellington, and then somebody requested "St. James Infirmary," and she got a big round of applause. Then the show was over. She said goodnight to the guys, changed, stuffed her dress into her shoulder bag and walked over to the station. The train rattled in half-empty; she took a seat and closed her eyes. On the train.

Concord Jazz and the Blue Note. Fifty-Second Street. Meredith would have something to crow about. "Hey, I take care of you, Sweets; me and you, right?" Meredith, on the couch. And now this new guy, Kessel. "Always on the lookout for girls like you." Okay, all right. It was Fifty-Second Street; it was Concord Jazz. She could phone her parents tomorrow. Maybe she'd call Miss Eliza Clark too. She could take Mark out for dinner. Mark. "Hey, Mark, guess what? I've got a contract with Concord, and I'm singing at the Blue Note next week." Yeah, terrific. It was all terrific.

She opened her eyes for a moment and looked around. The train was speeding on, through the dismal warehouses and refineries, into the tunnel. She felt empty somehow, and edgy, like she had forgotten something somewhere and she couldn't remember what. Mark and Meredith and Doug Kessel. Christ, why did that first show ever have to end? Those few minutes when all the pairs of eyes were on her. When her body was empty and all the music poured through.

She opened her eyes once again, and then she knew that she was not going to see Mark tonight. The train pulled into Fourteenth Street station, and she got off.

She pushed through the turnstiles, running from the crashing filament of the station, upstairs into the night. There were taxis on the avenue, a few couples and kids on the sidewalks. Sarah passed Fourteenth Street, passed Donegal's and the news stand, turned into Fifteenth Street.

The block was quiet now, a tunnel of silence. A patchwork of lights shone in upstairs windows, but there was no traffic, just the noise drifting in from the avenues at either end. It was late now, after two. She would not see Mark tonight. She felt suddenly free, jittery, reckless even, like she could cry or laugh; she didn't know which. Concord Jazz and the Blue Note. Maybe this was the big day of her career, the turning point. Maybe it was the day that, later, when she was interviewed by the *Times* or the *Voice,* she would say, "And, oh, when I got my first offer at the Blue Note, well then. . ." Maybe.

She stopped in front of her building and peered in through the glass door. Three naked bulbs lit the first floor hallway -- eight metal doors, all locked up for the night. And then she turned and kept on walking.

Concord Jazz and the Blue Note. She crossed Eighth Avenue and looked into the optician's shop on the corner; all the blank eyes stared back at her. She walked on west, Fifteenth Street and the ragged gray apartments past Ninth Avenue. The sagging warehouses, garbage piled up on the asphalt. There was nobody else around. Beat-up old signs hung from the sooty buildings: ABC Imports, Agostinelli's Restaurant Supply, Chelsea Auto Parts. At Tenth Avenue the tunnel of buildings ended - - across lay the docks and overhead ran the West Side Highway, all concrete and steel. She crossed over and walked out on the docks.

It was empty and silent, just the waves clapping on the pier. Across the water came the distant flickering lights of New Jersey: homes and factories and shopping centers sprawled over the land. Behind her the lights of Manhattan rose up, and she gazed at the city: the lights and the myriad windows, the rooms behind each window, the warm bodies sleeping in every room. She looked back at the water. She could feel something, something inside her, tangled up but growing.

It was way down inside somewhere, but it was welling up now, uncoiling. And then, abruptly, it was there, and she had only to release it. First "Ten Thousand Miles," then "I Come to the Garden," and "Wildwood Flower," and all the others, every one of them. On and on, her voice stretching out, living. She sang them all and after a while it was not really singing; she felt them and did not have to remember them, and they and her were all part of one thing. The music grew and scattered out across the waves, and she sang. And sang.

— Michael Owen